

Tactics of the Other Everyday: An Excursion to and from Situational Urban Scenography

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Abstract:

For a scenographic reading of urban settings, attentions are directed to the small, mundane and the everyday, which penetrate the non-institutional, always neglected, but most underlying aspects of urban life. Scattered in the most ordinary corners around the city, the scenes framed by a scenographic scope could nevertheless touch upon spatial, imaginary and situational potentials in perceiving and understanding urban spatial phenomena, diverting from the real and rational into the scenographic “other world”. These small, everyday yet partly surreal scenes, coupled with the notions of Tactic (Michel de Certeau, 1984) and Construction of Situation (Guy Debord, 1957), further come to a political gesture of resisting (destroying) the overwhelming institutionalization and standardization of contemporary life, as well as urban spaces. This progress from framing, association to tactics delineates a theatrical excursion departing from the real city into the fictitious, and eventually returning back to reality, yet with some residue imaginary subversive passion in turn to transform the real urban space.

Introduction:

In the poetic film *The Color of Pomegranates* (Tsvet granata, Armenfilm 1969), the film director of Armenian descent Sergei Parajanov, with his melancholically archaic and theatrical cinematic language, created a fascinating and dream-like world, in which the life of the Armenian poet Sayat Nova and his particular epoch gradually unfold themselves, and a complex of sensual desire, religious asceticism, individual and collective torments, and death starts to intertwine. The cryptic film is composed of sequences of tableaux-like scenes consisting of particular arrangements of ordinary yet significant objects, which not only construct “the material look of the epoch”, but extend upon the symbolic and the allegorical implications deeply imbedded in the collective cultural memory that trigger multi-potent reflections upon individual receptions.¹

The theatrical fascination inherent in the film suggests another possible scope of seeing and understanding when it comes to the city, namely perceiving the city as a collection of scenographic settings. As opposed to the factual, the analytical and the formal, it relentlessly digresses to the allegorical, the emotional and the vernacular, constructing another fictitious, yet meaningful world on a personal level. By focusing on the everyday and constantly addressing the other, these individual “other” worlds constitute a personal gesture of resistance against the sterility of the overwhelming institutional power in contemporary cities. When associated and organized, these individual efforts could convert the scattered fragments of the city into an interrelated dramatic field where numerous diverse narratives and meanings are to be generated, which in turn attempt to collectively disrupt the “strategies” of the institutional bodies of the society, with the increasingly impoverished and conforming urban scape and urban life they produce in contemporary cities.

Scenography, originally conceived as an optic technique to draw images of buildings properly, which is primarily concerned with perspective and “illusionistic reproduction”², is then mainly referred to as theatrical stage painting design, and later generally as stage design. In this paper, the word is generally used in its broader sense, as staging various elements in certain spatial configurations, closely related to the notion of theatricality.

Just as the famous Shakespearean aphorism “all the world’s a stage” illustrates, theatre has always been about a world that is opposed to the real one looking at the stage, namely the other world. Viewing the theatre then implies certain dynamic relation and interaction between the fictitious staged world and the real physical world of the audience. Such relations between the real and fictitious spaces are considered to be the basis of theatre, which could be identified with the metaphorical structure, whose metaphorical meaning is generated from the interaction between the “vehicle” (the word used) and the “tenor” (the word represented). As the “gap and deviation between different meanings” inherent in metaphor imply the indispensable existence of the literal context, the theatrical world refers back to the real world, making the “theatrical performance... at the same time both real and fictitious.” (Tronstad, 2002, p. 219)³ The charm of theatre lies in the subtle oscillating experience between the real and the surreal, which opens up a world for imagination out of the constraints of the real one, yet still with the awareness of the reference to the real world, and also with the possibility of returning to it and reappropriating it.

1. Framing the Stage: Agencies to the Other

In order to distinguish and construct another fictitious world out of the ubiquitous real one, one needs to devise a theatrical frame, which primarily divides the staged world from the spectators’ like a window, through which one’s eyes gaze into the world beyond, his mind also diving into it. The window should be understood in the sense of Alberti’s renowned metaphor for painting, which intentionally addresses the “elsewhere”, as “a separate spatial and temporal view” beyond the “real” walled world.⁴

The theatrical frame, departing from being a mere viewing device, thus becomes a medium between the theatrical other world and the real world of the audience. Being subjected to either literal and abstract definitions, which are respectively the physical one that confines the stage and the conceptual one “contextualization and foregrounding of the action”⁵, the frame therefore problematizes the relationship between the two worlds, and the subject-object relationship between the spectator and the stage, which fundamentally direct the formal and theoretical developments of theatre and scenography.

In the early development of theatre, the stage—although always referring to the other world-- is more or less integrated with the reality without rigorous frames, either in the partly enclosed ancient Greek amphitheatre and Roman theatre, or in the more temporary medieval theatres performed in found places.⁶ This tradition of “‘theatricalization’ of real place” (Marvin Carlson 2016) was fundamentally altered in the Renaissance “theatre in the hall” (teatro della sala), especially by the development of the “modern” proscenium, which acts as a frame to contain the fictitious theatrical world, and to create a sense of spectacle, usually coupled with the illusory fixed-perspective stage painting. The stage thus becomes another space separated from the one of the audience.⁷ This separation, in turn, generates almost an equal division and confrontation between the two worlds. In Farnese Theatre in Parma, where the first permanent Renaissance proscenium stage was installed, the rectangular theatre hall is spatially divided into two comparably equal parts of the U-shaped auditorium and the deep stage, marked by the proscenium frame in the middle.

In French theatre of the 17th and 18th centuries, the theatrical stage evolved from being the mirror image of the real world, to the object of subjective sensory experience, and eventually to the

window metaphor that intends to merge with reality, indicating the changing role of the theatrical frame and the subject-object relationship in theatre. Aligned with the rationalist philosophy of the time, the conceptual frame of the mirror image conceives the theatrical stage as minor individual worlds (*mondes particulier*) reflecting the larger real world (*le grand monde*), with underlying reflective principles of “absolute separation and parallelism” (Camp, 64): the distinction between the staged world and the reality must be hard and clear, while the represented theatrical illusion ought to manifest a sense of truth as to the logic of reality. Comparable to the infinitely divisible world, the mirror conception of the theatrical frame also opens up possibilities of frames-within-the-frame, which create an intricate nest of illusory worlds, corresponding to the contemporary theatrical convention of plays-within-the-play. In the mid-18th century, the window metaphor of the frame was proposed as opposed to the mirror image, by dramatists like Diderot, in order to fundamentally dissolve the distinction between the staged world and the real world, thus to merge the two worlds, with “absolute proximity, directness and fidelity” (Camp, 88). The theatrical frame becomes a transparent window, through which the spectators could not only gaze into the reality on stage, but enter into it.⁸ Radical as such attempts to blur the conceptual boundary between stage and audience that is well-established by early academics are, the conceptual frame that divides theatrical world from reality persists, though much more subtly, for the underlying conflict between theatre’s very nature of “repeatability” and “human mortality, time” (Camp, 90).⁹

As opposed to framing, a counteraction of “deframing” (Bonitzer, 1978) thus begins to be relevant, which indeed reveals the capacity of the frame to establish an “assemblage” (*agencement*) within, between and beyond the frames, where dynamic relations between figures, objects, spaces and times are established.¹⁰ “Deframings” (*Décadrages*), in a cinematic sense including the breaking of fixed perspective, pushing out of the frame edges, fragmentation, perversion and etc.¹¹, should be more explicitly defined as the means of disrupting the subject-object relationship in terms of scenography.

This consciousness of de-framing was already present in the Baroque painters to break the frame edges and dynamically shift the viewpoint of perceiving, in their general gesture of resisting the classical conventions. But the prevalence of theatrical de-framing came much later. From the mid-19th century, symbolist, futurist dramatists intended to break the limit of the frame, by means of incorporating other senses (scent), using minimalist and suggestive scenographic elements, total disregarding of unity, compressing plays into the “very brief” and etc. (Marinetti et al. 1970), to further “obscure the distinction between life and art.” The deconstruction of the frame also entails the deconstruction of the presumed identity of the spectator, either by incorporating the spectator into the play, or by activating the audience’s sense of engagement and his consciousness to reframe the stage by himself.¹²

The framing and de-framing in the scenographic sense could bring tremendous implications to perceiving and understanding contemporary urban conditions: seeing the city as a discursive combination of multiple stages. When wandering through the city, one directs his gaze to various scenes to frame the “other” worlds, where imaginary dramas are to be played. The pervasive spread of multiple frames of mirrors, glass, and screens in urban space further adds a multiplicative effect of plays-within-the-play, as well as a relentless transgression of the assumed boundary between the physical world of the wanderers and the fictitious other world. The frame, on staging multiple nested other worlds in the city, becomes a generator and multiplier of perceived urban space, opening up imaginations while complicating substantially the subject-object relationship of the observer to the city. The city in scenographic frames digresses to “a third space” (Lefebvre, 1991), which is at once imaginary and real, and constantly oscillates between the two.

2. Imaginary Associations: Constructing the Other

While the frame marks the gate to the theatrical world, certain imaginary deviations are of utter importance to the construction of this other world. This imagination of theatricality could be simply ascribed to allegorical and narrative associations.

Allegory, generally referred to as a figure of speech in literature, could characterize the essence of theatrical imagination, for its etymological relation to the “other”. In his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels)*, Walter Benjamin defines allegory as a pre-eminent way of experiencing the world, one that is fundamentally “fragmentary and enigmatic”, and always tend to transform things into signs (or other things), with a great degree of arbitrariness and unreason, only to touch upon the otherwise “inaccessible” truth. Allegory always points to elsewhere; or with its “unnatural” leaps it arrives at “a mode of greater, more self-referential” and higher fictionality.¹³ This fictionality, composed of allegorical objects and relations, in “other” places or times, characterizes precisely, and in turn enhances the theatrical other world, in its awareness of the enigmatic illusion, and its intricate yet fragmentary relation to the real and the truth.

Allegory, being esoteric in the Baroque sense, always requires certain collective knowledge and intellectual engagement. More recent allegories, however, add more arbitrary, discrete and personal attributes. Baudelaire approached allegory in a manner of striking “suddenness and discontinuity” (Cowan, 1981, p. 120), in the absence of “prior preparation” and proper vocabulary or images for allegory of his time. This arbitrary and improvisational aspect provokes a destructive and ironic effect, by relentlessly “wrenching things of their familiar contexts”.¹⁴ Allegory is, thus, freed fundamentally to subjective, transient and polysemantic potentials. With this subjective sudden alienation, allegory could be devised in constructing urban scenography, which transforms and deconstructs urban settings to the multiple higher “fictionalities” by personal interpretations, challenging fundamentally the common image of the city established by the “reigning reality.”

The narrative association is partly implied in allegory. As is well exemplified by some of Peter Greenaway’s films, allegory could be used as a “structuring device” of the narrative in an implicit way, while at the same time inseparably interweaved with the narratives.¹⁵ The individual allegorical objects, not necessarily relevant, could be connected and interpreted to form a narrative that lies beyond their physical existence.

The double act of connecting and interpreting is thus central to the narrative association of the theatrical imagination. This inherent tendency of imagining something to happen is defined by Evreinov (1927) as “the theatrical instinct”. On imagining the quotidian street scene as his “favourite theatre” of which he’s at the same time the stage manager, the playwright, and the actor, Evreinov experiences the great freedom and “imaginable pleasure” to transform the everyday urban reality into a novel play,¹⁶ a process comparably informative for the imaginary construction of urban scenography. With allegorical and narrative associations, one could transform the real world, by individual interpretations, into the fictitious theatrical world elsewhere, which is, contrasting to the real, ultimately free, pleasant, enigmatic and intricately meaningful.

The construction of urban scenography takes advantage of the magnificent power of imagination, activating the enigmatic and deconstructive tendency inherent in allegorical connections, and further “the power of manipulating reality, and the full pleasure of such freedom” (Kernan, 1974, p. 4).

3. Recharging the Real: Transgressing from the Other

In English Renaissance theatre, while the magic power of imagination was widely recognized, the plays usually end with the shattering of these imagined realities, with a sense of disillusion of the playwrights in their seemingly failure to “believe in the power of their own make-believe for more than an instant.” (Kernan, 1974, p. 5)

This inherent fragility of theatrical imagination, predestining the intrinsic fragility of the illusory other world, in turn, questions the nature of imagination in constructing urban scenography: whether it is pure escapism from reality in the guise of imaginary freedom.

The virtue of theatrical fictionality ought to be reconsidered in its relation to reality. Scamozzi's Theater at Sabbioneta in Renaissance time, designed in a way resembling the actual urban spatial configuration that represented the power structure of statecraft,¹⁷ gives a hint of its possible reversal: urban scenography could propose to impose influences from the imaginary other world on the actual urban space, in a political attempt to disrupt the established psychological and material urban spatial structure, and the dominant power of economic and political institutions behind.

This line of bringing theatre to reality has been followed by many dramatists ever since the theatre moved indoors in Renaissance. In Rousseau's anti-theatre story of the dance in Geneva, he recalls the spectators' participation in the “play” as a political metaphor for an “ideal republic”, in which the window frame is dissolved, so is the theatre.¹⁸ After the symbolists' and futurists' continuous attempts to rupture the theatrical frame in the hope of breaking the distinction between life and art, avant-garde theatre in the 1970s finally brought about the notion of the “public”. The “environmental theatre” of the time, instead of merely returning to the public space (as in the case of Medieval theatres), actively engages the spectators into the performance, making theatre a form of art “not simply to entertain but to transform” (Aronson, 2006, p. 34), not in the sense of theatrical instinct, but the external world.¹⁹

The theories and methods of active engagement and transformation of society are substantially elaborated by the Situationists, in their central appeal to “construct situations”, which indeed so properly delineates the essence of urban scenography and its subversive potentials.

“Constructing Situations”, defined by Guy Debord (1957) as “concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality”, is fundamentally related to urban scenography, in its taking place in the urban environment, its performative nature and the attempts to “transform”. Initially exiling themselves in the form of *dérive* in the city, the urban scenographers (experiencer) are able to conceptually construct multiple scenographic stages of plays scattered around the city, which then interweaved to form new psychogeography of the city that is closely related to individual emotions and behaviours. Urban scenography, like constructing situations, acts like a new kind of “game”, of imaginatively connecting things, plotting narratives and finally enacting them, with certain playfulness and joy of arbitrary interpretation and creation. This game relies on the fascinating and dramatic potentials of the everyday objects, thus radically negating “the element of competition and of separation from everyday life” (Debord, 1957), only to engage in the “battle of leisure” against the impoverishing overwhelming of the “mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes”. (Debord, 1957)

The resistant and transformative potential in the game could only be revealed through bringing urban scenography into enactment. To consider in architectural or spatial terms, this enactment should be by no means the physical performance of a play, but rather apprehended on the level of “unitary urbanism” (Debord, 1957), as a form of “integral art” that trespasses on the realm of life.²⁰

The enactment of urban scenography is thus, constructing spaces that bear the potential of scenographic apprehensions, with multiple agencies of frames, dispositions of “poetic objects” that could intrigue allegorical and narrative imaginations, and with an active engagement of the experiencers. This kind of space, being non-static, but relentlessly dynamic, transitory and constantly incorporating personal engagements, ought to be conceived on an urban level, in order to be able to disturb and transform the established monotonous urban life more substantially and systematically. It’s in this sense that the excursion to urban scenography is completed: bringing the imaginative and partly subversive power of theatricality back to life, in an effort to change it.

Conclusion:

Bringing together frames as agencies to the other world and associations as the imaginary construction of the other, urban scenography and theatre indeed not only deal with the other world, but more precisely with the relationship between one and the other, and the space between them. This dualistic relationship is taken in a particular way that neither assimilates nor differentiates, but rather imaginarily cultivates a third space (the theatrical space), which is neither one nor the other, yet still related to both. It’s the *détournement* of the relationship itself.

In dealing with various relationships in the context of architecture and urbanism, the scenographic approach could become a creative way of reframing, especially when the pervasive conflicts between the everyday and the spectacles of the institutional powers in contemporary cities are involved. The conflicts are to be *détourned* to create a third, theatrical and almost surreal space, on either side of the conflicts or in the in-between space: it is suddenly so alien and strange that it fundamentally questions and disturbs the reality of the conflict, yet more prominently the existence of the spectacle, for its position to be perceived. The *détournement* and theatricalizing of the conflicts are therefore the *détournement* of the spectacular constructs, or the reframing of them, in order to transform them into stages of situational games that are always subjected to alternative appropriations.

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Endnotes:

¹ The themes and cultural implications of the film *The Color of Pomegranates* are extensively discussed in: Steffen, J. (2013). *The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov*. University of Wisconsin Press, 114-156.

² On the origin and historical developments of the notion of scenography in relation to perspective representation, see: Panofsky, E., Wood, C. S., & Wood, C. (1991). *What is Scenography*. In: *Perspective as symbolic form*. New York: Zone books, p. 98-103.

³ Theatre is compared with the metaphorical structure in understanding the relationship between the theatrical fictitious world and the real world. See: Tronstad, R. (2002). Could the world become a stage? Theatricality and metaphorical structures. *Substance*, 31(2), 216-224.

⁴ Discussions on the misunderstanding of Alberti's window metaphor, see: Friedberg, A. (2006). *The virtual window: from Alberti to Microsoft* (p. 101). Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 32-33.

⁵ The division of literal and abstract frames, see: Aronson A. (2006) *Avant-garde scenography and the frames of the theatre*. In: Ackerman A., Puchner M. (eds) *Against Theatre. Performance Interventions*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 21-22.

⁶ On the history of western theatre incorporating the real surroundings, see: Carlson, M. (2016). Keynote Address: *Whose Space Is It, Anyway?* In *Theatre Symposium* (Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 9-20). The University of Alabama Press, 9-10; and Hildy, F. J. (2014, February 06). *Theatre design*. Retrieved January 04, 2018, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-design>

⁷ The proscenium in the modern sense, which basically is "a wall with a large arched opening" to the stage, was developed in the 16-17th-century Italy, for "the Renaissance fascination with perspective and ... moving pictures". See: Hildy, F. J. (2014, February 06). *Theatre design*. Retrieved January 04, 2018, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-design>.

⁸ In one of Diderot's plays *Le Fils naturel*, he casts himself into the play as an intruding spectator hiding in the room where the play is performed. See: Camp, P. (2014). *The First Frame: Theatre Space in Enlightenment France*. Cambridge University Press, 88-89.

⁹ The historical development of the conceptual frame in French neo-classical theatre, and the implication on the relationship between the staged world and the real world. See: the theatrical frame in French neo-classical dramatic theory, in: Camp, P. (2014). *The First Frame: Theatre Space in Enlightenment France*. Cambridge University Press, 60-92.

¹⁰ Cinematic analysis of the frame as spatial and temporal agencies of assemblage, see: Tawa, M. (2010). *Agency, Crisis, Disestablishment*, in: *Agencies of the frame: Tectonic strategies in cinema and architecture*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.

¹¹ On various means of deframing relevant in cinema, see: Bonitzer P (1978). 'Décadrages' (Deframings), *Cahiers du Cinema* 284, 197-203.

¹² The introduction of the spectator into the play is illustrated by Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*, and Richard Wagner's "mystic gulf" of double proscenium; the activation of the spectator's conscious to reframe is exemplified either by Brecht's exposure of the technical elements of the frame, or by John Cage's open performances necessitates subjective framings. Other Efforts to shatter the presence of the theatrical frame by symbolists, futurists and others and the impacts on the deconstruction of the spectator, see: Aronson A. (2006) *Avant-garde scenography and the frames of the theatre*. In: Ackerman A., Puchner M. (eds) *Against Theatre. Performance Interventions*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 26-34.

¹³ The explanation of Walter Benjamin's analysis of Baroque Trauerspiel allegory is mostly based on: Cowan, B. (1981). *Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory*. *New German Critique*, (22), 109-122.

¹⁴ Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's allegory is based on: Cowan, B. (1981). *Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory*. *New German Critique*, (22), 109-122.

¹⁵ Peter Greenaway extensively uses allegory in his films as a way of signification and structuring narrative. In the film *The Draughtsman's Contract*, the contracts, the paintings and conversations act as allegories, which when deciphered and connected form the progress of the plots. See: Elliott, B., Greenaway, P., & Purdy, A. (1997). *Peter Greenaway: On Common Ground: Allegory as Architecture*. In: *Architecture and allegory (Art & design monograph)*. London: Academy Editions, 27-44.

¹⁶ Evreinov, N. N. (1927). *The theatre in life*. Brentano's, 180.

¹⁷ The Scamozzi's Theater at Sabbioneta metaphorically indicates its situation in the city of Sabbioneta, by means of stage scenography, frescos on the lateral walls, and the colonnade and stairs in the auditorium, further representing Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga's political will and control over the city. Forster, K. W. (1977).

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¹⁸ Going beyond Diderot's transparent window metaphor of theatrical frame, Rousseau describes one occasion when men and women, after looking at a spontaneous dance of soldiers and officers in St. Gervais Square in Geneva from their windows, went downstairs to join the joyous dance themselves. His description of the "joyous spontaneous dance" in Geneva and his anti-theatrical notion of transparency in terms of a nostalgic political ideal are explained in: Camp, P. (2014). The theatrical frame in French neo-classical dramatic theory, in: *The First Frame: Theatre Space in Enlightenment France*. Cambridge University Press, 90-92.

¹⁹ The continuous efforts to dissolve the theatrical frame in historical avant-garde theatre, from the symbolists, futurists to the "environmental theatre" are extensively discussed in: Aronson A. (2006) Avant-garde scenography and the frames of the theatre. In: Ackerman A., Puchner M. (eds) *Against Theatre. Performance Interventions*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 21-35.

²⁰ Most of the enactments of urban scenography refer to the Situationist manifesto of constructing situations. Notions of situation, game, dérive, psychogeography, unitary urbanism and etc. are explained in: Debord, G. (1957). *Report on Constructing Situations*. Situationist International Anthology. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets. Available from Internet:< <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>>. [Last access: 10-01-2011].